Is Yours a Blame Game Culture?

Pointing the finger at someone else doesn't solve the problem.

I once watched a tennis match in a park where each player's goal was to smash the ball back to the other side of the net.

I once watched an air hockey game in a bar where each player aggressively guarded his own goal and then rifled the puck back toward the other player's goal.

I once watched Olympic beach volleyball where swimsuit-clad Olympians scrambled to make sure the ball didn't touch the sand on their side of the net before volleying it back to the other side.

I once watched a management team where members worked just hard enough to smash, rifle or volley a problem, question or issue to another member of the team.

It all started when I asked a customer service representative why an order was late. That representative explained that it wasn't his fault that the machine operator didn't run the parts. So I walked out to the floor and asked the machine operator, who told me that Inventory Control couldn't find the parts when he needed to run them. Of course, it wasn't Inventory Control's fault either. Inventory Control pointed out that receiving dock personnel had put the order in the wrong location. So I confronted the receiveing dock personnel, who informed me that the order was in the wrong spot because Customer Service had entered it incorrectly, so, of course, it wasn't the receiving dock's fault that the order was late.

something went wrong. It was as if each team member considered his job done so long as he could push the issue just far enough along that someone else could be blamed.

The Blame Game plays out in myriad ways. From time to time we hear a supervisor blame a shopfloor associate for not

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carrying out a task. "I told him to do it," the supervisor says. As if telling someone once, never checking up and never validating that the request was carried out is somehow acceptable leadership. Who among us remembers everything we are asked or told to do?

Another form of the game is Blame the Blamer. This is the one where a team member responds to criticism by turning the tables on the blamer. The operations manager blames slow sales on the account executive, who in turn explains that he could spend more time selling if he were not so busy meeting with customers to smooth out quality issues created by the operations manager. And around it goes.

Then there's the tactic of blaming the one thing we don't control or the one thing we can't change. I did some advisory work for a family-owned business whose employees blamed just about every problem on the owner's son. I interviewed the son and was baffled. The kid was no rocket scientist, but neither was he a fool. How could everything be his fault? Then it dawned on me: The owner wasn't going to fire his own son, so as long as the team could rationalize an explanation for how the son caused the problem, they took themselves off the hook.

The one that grates on me the most is the version of the game in which the customer gets blamed. The parts aren't to specifications because the specifications are too tight, or the order would not have been late if the customer had just planned ahead and started manufacturing the parts sooner. What?

Sadly, many companies have a Blame Game culture where the goal each day is to go home believing that whatever bad stuff happened was someone else's fault.

> **In a Blame Game culture, everyone has an alibi and team members put in just enough effort to make sure that they can avoid culpability in the event that something goes wrong.**

Who's to Blame?

There we had it: a perfect circle of blame wherein each and every person had a logical explanation for why the order being late wasn't their fault, until I literally had circled back to where I had started. It would almost be comical— me, the naïve child opening up a matryoshka doll only to find another matryoshka doll inside that itself contained yet another matryoshka doll—if it were not for the fact that totally ignored by this perfect circle of blame was a valued customer who didn't have his parts.

Playing Games

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What to Do?

The fix starts at the top. Like so many aspects of business culture, the Blame Game culture is created directly or indirectly by the leader. When something goes wrong, does the leader seek to identify and pillory the guilty, thereby creating an environment where people just try to stay out of traffic, or is the focus placed on solving the problem?

Take responsibility for everything. I recall a board member who accused me of being too quick to take the responsibility for the shortcomings of my team. I had to explain to him that the shortcomings of my team were still, one way or another, my shortcomings. After all, I was the one who chose the team. When the leader ultimately owns the organization's problems, the team members follow the example and responsibility becomes part of the culture.
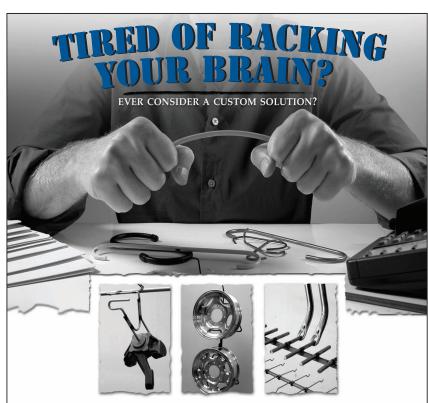
Clear the air. Early in my career, when one employee pointed the finger at another, the CEO for whom we worked brought them both into the room with him to iron things out. Blaming an individual in the absence of the blamed was strictly forbidden. Fascinating how less likely one is to point the finger when the person to whom we're assigning the blame is sitting right across the table.

Focus on the customer. Finally, a Blame Game company is one that doesn't spend enough time talking about its customers. When we bring every issue back to how it affects the customer, regardless of who is to blame, we quickly get past the finger pointing and on to solutions. ▥

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